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AN AUTHOR IN EXILE

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In these days when so much good poetry is coming from the trenches, and even the rigors of a German prison camp fail to down the poet,¹ an especial interest attaches to the only Roman who has a fair claim to the title of trench poet. Horace had seen field service and, no doubt, privations of sorts, but we have of this period only a few arm-chair reminiscences. Other Roman poets stand guard chiefly on the doorstep of the reigning beauty. Ovid at Tomi was in a unique position. Banished to a frontier town on the frayed edge of the *pax Romana*, he watched marauding savages mop up the country as far as the walls of Tomi. He even picked up the spent arrows that had carried into the streets. With fear and suspicion he watched the alien population of Tomi, and, in lulls from without, shuddered at the anarchy within, when some trifling altercation in the market place led up to a stabbing scrape. To the modern mind this would be good material, but Ovid did not find it stimulating. He remains strictly a conscientious objector, recording only to condemn, and the burden of complaint and protest give to the *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto* a monotony which the author himself was the first to admit.² Notwithstanding this element, the poems are full of interesting facts and impressions. The main facts about Ovid's stay at Tomi may be found in any manual of Latin literature.³ The object of the present paper is to consider or reconsider in an unsentimental way a few suggestive details. What were the actual privations and sensations of a drawing-room lion in the Sahara of Tomi? How was a Roman author affected by absence from his friends, his publisher, and

¹ Cf. F. W. Harvey, *Gloucestershire Friends* (Gütersloh).

² *Ex Ponto* iii. 9. 1-12.

³ Cf. also Gaston Boissier, *L'Opposition sous les Césars*, pp. 107-59; Otto Ribbeck, *Geschichte der römischen Dichtung*, II, 313-40; H. S. Gehman, "Ovid's Experience with Languages at Tomi," *Classical Journal*, XI (1915), 50-55.

first-class library facilities? In this introspective period, what light does he throw on his former methods of work?

First impressions of Tomi would have distressed any Italian, and Ovid's disgust for the face of nature was never altered. A pathetic note that always rings true is his *desiderium locorum*, the longing for his "ain countree." These plains, treeless except for a few evergreens, contrast painfully with the orchards, groves, and vineyards of Italy. There is no bird note unless it be for the cries of raucous sea birds. The inland sea, fed by so many rivers, is of a sickly and diluted blue.¹ The denizens of Tomi are hideous in their hides (furs?) and loose trousers. Even the women are without charm; they carry water on their heads, bray grain in mortars, but do not know how to knit.² The sheaf of arrows which Ovid sends to a friend is symbolic of the fruits of the country.³ The winter landscapes are grotesques to Ovid. He shows us plants sheathed in ice, fish caught alive in a frame of frozen crystal, men afoot and on horseback, disporting themselves on the "slippery shell" that coats the rivers, and ox teams lumbering along where ships lately glided. Bespeaking the credulity of his readers, with less confidence than Munchausen, Ovid tells of walking dry shod on the ocean. Frozen wines are as startling to him as "Frozen Words" to readers of the *Tatler*.⁴ The wines are more fragile than the jars, and when you ask a drink they hand you a stone. Other Roman poets mention similar prodigies without excitement, but the attitude of Ovid, who saw them with his own eyes, is most illuminating. Apparently no very sharp line was drawn between the fabulous in mythology and travelers' tales of natural wonders. Both received the same bland acceptance with mental reservations.⁵

On actual living conditions Ovid has not very much to say. He had plenty of money and could buy such comforts as the place afforded. He had a house which he considered somewhat inadequate.⁶ His constitution, impaired before his exile, suffered from mental strain and from the climate. He was troubled with insom-

¹ *Ex Ponto* iv. 10. 61-62.

³ *Ibid.* iii. 8. 17-19.

² *Ibid.* iii. 8. 9-12.

⁴ Joseph Addison, *The Tatler*, No. 254.

⁵ Cf. G. Lafaye, *Les Métamorphoses d'Ovide* (Paris, 1904), pp. 14-15.

⁶ *Tr.* iii. 3. 9.

nia and indigestion, resulting in a failure of appetite, weakness, pallor, and a loss of weight.¹ He mentions one serious illness accompanied by delirium.² No medical attendance was to be had at Tomi, nor was there such a thing as a diet kitchen.³ Even for a well man the fare could not be called luxurious.⁴ The water disagreed with him; he calls it swamp water, brackish with sea salt.⁵ Wines, imported, probably from Greece,⁶ offered a possible substitute, but Ovid had always been practically a water-drinker.⁷ Despite all this, his health at times seems to have been better than before his exile, a fact which he grimly ascribes to lack of leisure for the luxury of sickness.⁸

Amusements and occupations were, however, much circumscribed at Tomi. Gardening, which had been a favorite exercise with Ovid, was impossible, requiring as it did a residence outside the protection of the walls.⁹ Our text allows us to speak of Ovid as a trench poet, for he tells us of springing to the firing step each time the watchman sounded the alarm,¹⁰ but candor compels the admission that we doubt it. When Ovid tells us of buckling on his armor with palsied fingers, and placing a helmet upon his gray hairs, the resemblance to the aged Priam seems fairly to jump at the reader.¹¹ The opportunity for a legitimate pathetic effect was

¹ *Ibid.* iii. 8. 23-34; *Ex Ponto* i. 10. 3-28.

⁶ *Ex Ponto* i. 7. 13.

² *Tr.* iii. 3. 1-24.

⁷ *Ibid.* i. 10. 29-30; i. 5. 45-46.

³ *Ibid.* iii. 3. 9-10.

⁸ *Tr.* v. 2. 3-6.

⁴ *Ex Ponto* i. 10. 31-32.

⁹ *Ex Ponto* i. 8. 39-62.

⁵ *Tr.* iii. 8. 23; *Ex Ponto* i. 10. 35; ii. 7. 73-74. ¹⁰ *Tr.* iv. 1. 71-76.

¹¹ Compare Virgil *Aeneid* ii. 509-11:

arma diu senior desueta trementibus aevo
circumdat nequiquam umeris, et inutile ferrum
cingitur, ac densos fertur moriturus in hostis.

And Ovid *Tr.* iv. 1. 71-74:

Aspera militiae iuvenis certamina fugi,
Nec nisi lusura movimus arma manu.
Nunc senior gladioque latus, scutoque sinistram,
Canitiem galeae subicioque meam.
Nam dedit e specula custos ubi signa tumultus,
Induimur trepida protinus arma manu.

Ovid was fond of comparing himself to mythological characters; cf. the comparison to the classical Humpty Dumpty, Elpenor, *Tr.* iii. 4. 19-20, and to the long-suffering Ulysses, *Tr.* i. 5. 57 f. In comparisons his debts are not always acknowledged; cf.

too good to be overlooked, but it need not be assumed that drilling with the Home Guard took up much of Ovid's time at Tomi. In seeking amusement, ignorance of the prevailing language was at first a great handicap. He tells us repeatedly that he had no one with whom he could speak Latin,¹ but we observe that he was able to dictate a letter in that language to someone, presumably a servant.² In the same letter, to his wife, Ovid says that in his delirium he raved of her, as "they" told him upon his convalescence, but this is perhaps not to be taken seriously. Some Greek, with a Getic burr, was spoken by the descendants of the Milesian colonists,³ and he might have found companions to drink and dice with had he cared for these amusements.⁴ There seems to be no doubt that he did make acquaintances, and learned the native tongue well enough to give readings in it, but more of this in another connection. In the summer season, when navigation was open, Ovid haunted the water front to quiz the crews of incoming vessels and get the latest news from Rome. Ships from Italy, or even Greece, were rare, however, as compared with the coasters from nearby ports which made up most of the arrivals.⁵ Ovid's main occupations were correspondence and literary work, in his circumstances intimately associated.

Despite what Ovid says on the dearth of ships, his communications with Rome, though slow,⁶ seem to have been frequent and fairly reliable. He recognizes the possibility that letters have gone astray, but without taking it very seriously.⁷ His informal or prose

Ex Ponto ii. 5. 45-56, where Salanus and Germanicus, in a thin disguise, represent the Homeric Menelaus and Odysseus (*Il.* iii. 213-24), and *Heroides*, iii. 45-52, and *passim*, where Briseis speaks with the tongue of Andromache. The older poets were a quarry for Ovid, and his method is best described in his own words, *Ex Ponto* iii.

9. 47-48:

Denique materiae, quam quis sibi finxerit ipse,
Arbitrio variat multa poeta suo.

¹ *Tr.* v. 7. 53-54.

² *Ibid.* iii. 3. 1-2.

³ *Ibid.* v. 7. 51-52, and Gehman, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

⁴ *Ex Ponto* i. 5. 45-46.

⁵ *Tr.* iii. 12. 31-44.

⁶ *Ex Ponto* iii. 4. 59-60; iv. 5. 1-8; iv. 11. 15-16.

⁷ *Tr.* iv. 7. 21-26.

correspondence was apparently large, including not only his family and former intimates, but others not so close.¹ No doubt in these lost letters he gave the details of his everyday existence and discussed his mysterious *error* with more frankness. The *Tristia* and *Epistulae* function in part as regular correspondence. In them he expresses thanks for gifts,² and acknowledges reprints³ with rare punctiliousness and a detailed comment which must have been extremely gratifying to the donors; he sends condolences upon the death of a friend,⁴ and, when he hears of the death of a friend's wife, begins his letter with regrets and ends it with congratulations, assuming that a second marriage will no doubt have followed by the time the letter reaches Rome.⁵ As genuine letters the *Epistulae* and, to a less degree, the *Tristia* contain much special pleading and flattery addressed to a small circle of influential friends. This pleading had to be done. It might have been carried in Ovid's prose correspondence but for the fact that Ovid wished to reach, by indirect fire, the imperial family. Those higher up might see his published work, but they would not see his informal letters. He knew very well that these personal matters would hurt him with the general public, and it is not likely that he hoped for much general interest in his *Epistulae*. The *Tristia* were addressed to a wider circle; in fact, Ovid makes a distinct appeal to the bourgeoisie; cf. *Tr.* i. 1. 88, *et satis a media sit tibi plebe legi*, and *Tr.* iii. 1. 82, *sumite plebeiae carmina nostra manus*. But the epistolary mission of Ovid's poems of exile was not his only handicap. He had others which he recognizes and explains with a candor that is most instructive.

In the first place, Ovid was not the type of poet that finds inspiration in adversity. Quite unaware that he is expressing a grave limitation, he tells us that a poet's mood must be serene, his mind glad and care free, in order to produce great poetry.⁶ Like one of the brooks or springs that he is so fond of describing, the pool of thought had to be unruffled to show the gems of wit. He was not inspired to write at Tomi; he wrote from habit and to pass the

¹ *Ex Ponto* iv. 2. 5-6.

² *Ibid.* 2. 8.

³ *Ibid.* iii. 5. 7 f.

⁴ *Ibid.* i. 9.

⁵ *Ibid.* iv. 11.

⁶ *Tr.* i. 1. 39-41; v. 12. 3-4.

time. Even on shipboard, and in a raging storm, he writes, constrained by sheer habit and gasping at his own temerity.¹ But there is no grandeur in the storm; he sees himself as the storm center. The proper *milieu* for a poet is a garden, the place for composition a couch.² He needs a country place to insure scholarly retirement.³ Then, too, there were practical difficulties at Tomi. Like most of his clique, Ovid was a bookish poet, and his library at Tomi was contemptibly small.⁴ If he wrote his agent at Rome for a book, a year might elapse before its arrival. Even more than reference books, he missed some friend with a trained ear and a fund of exact information. With our compact and handy reference books one often thinks with pity of the labor required to look up some petty detail in a cumbrous *volumen*. Ovid strongly suggests that he had preferred to consult a walking dictionary when he says, *Tr.* iii. 14. 43-44, "often at a loss for some word, or name or place, I have no one who can inform me."⁵ We get an insight into the practical value of the much-abused *recitatio* from Ovid's insistence on his need of a critical ear.⁶ Evidently Latin verse was best criticized from hearing. Despite his reputation for cleaving to pet faults, Ovid had evidently deferred to criticism, and revised conscientiously.⁷ While rating the critic and corrector far below the creative artist, Ovid declares the former's task is far more arduous.⁸ At Tomi there was a feeling of futility which made such labor intolerable.⁹ Absence from Rome when a triumph is about to be staged is another serious aggravation to Ovid. Combining, as he did, the instincts of a court poet and a journalist, he saw in such an event his chance to turn a timely copy of verses and rehabilitate himself with the imperial impresario. But the reports as they came to him were meager and belated.¹⁰ By the time his poem reached Rome the subject would be ancient history. More than this, it would be threadbare, for there was no lack of poets on the ground

¹ *Tr.* i. 11. 9-12, 41-44.

³ *Ibid.* iii. 14. 41.

² *Ibid.* i. 11. 37-38.

⁴ *Ibid.* iii. 14. 37-38; v. 12. 53.

⁵ This passage is apparently misunderstood by Gehman, *op. cit.*, p. 52. In the entire passage Ovid is speaking of the difficulties of Latin composition.

⁶ *Tr.* iii. 14. 39-40; iv. 1. 89-92; v. 12. 53-54.

⁷ *Ex Ponto* iv. 12. 25-26.

⁹ *Ibid.* iii. 9. 17-20.

⁸ *Ibid.* iii. 9. 23-24.

¹⁰ *Tr.* iv. 2. 67-74.

to make capital of the occasion.¹ Ovid fully appreciated the preciousness of novelty² and the value of a "scoop." He did try to compete against these odds, but only with the gravest misgivings.³ Of course one triumph was very like another, and the details were an old story to Ovid, as he shows in a spirited prospectus.⁴ It would seem that he might have sent his copy in advance and had it "set up" waiting the event, but this does not seem to have occurred to Ovid.

It may be wondered why Ovid was so consistently obtuse to the material around him. One answer has been given in his utter lack of sympathy with his environment. Another lies in the fact that he was so pre-eminently the *doctus poeta*. Modern in many ways, he was still a stickler for the old forms and, above all, a poet of sophistication. Where he does touch his environment at Tomi it is only to conventionalize it, to produce the prototype of the Cooper Indian. Thus, after he has been initiated in the native dialects, he happens to mention before a group of Getae the sterling qualities of his friend Cotta.⁵ Instantly, grasping his cue in the word friendship, a venerable Getan steps forward and narrates the story of Orestes and Pylades at great length, and with all Ovidian flourishes.⁶ Conceivably the Greek myth might have survived in

¹ *Ex Ponto* iii. 4. 53-64.

² *Ibid.* iii. 4. 51-52.

⁴ *Tr.* iv. 2. 15-56.

³ *Ibid.* iii. 4. 3-6.

⁵ *Ex Ponto* iii. 2. 37-102.

⁶ Compare the gambit in this case with one from the *Metamorphoses*. *Ex Ponto* iii. 2. 45-52:

Est locus in Scythia, Tauros dixere priores,
Qui Getica longe non ita distat humo.
Hac ego sum terra, patriae nec poenitet, ortus.
Consortem Phoebi gens colit illa deam.
Templa manent hodie vastis innixa columnis
Perque quater denos itur in illa gradus.
Fama refert illic signum caeleste fuisse,
Quoque minus dubites, stat basis orba dea.

Metamorphoses viii. 620-25:

Quoque minus dubites, tiliae conterminua quercus
Collibus est Phrygiis, modico circumdata muro.
Ipse locum vidi, nam me Pelopeia Pittheus
Misit in arva suo quondam regnata parenti.

And the conclusion, *ibid.* 719-22:

Ostendit adhuc Tyaneius illic
Incola de gemino vicinos corpore truncos.
Haec mihi non vani, neque erat cur fallere vellent,
Narravere senes.

Gehman, *op. cit.*, p. 55, accepts the story at face value, but cf. Ribbeck, *op. cit.*, p. 323.

this Greek colony, but, as recited here, it lacks one touch of nature to make it plausible. It is neither more nor less Ovid than the story of Iphigenia,¹ or that of Medea.² In this same category is the Sarmatian shepherd, who wears a helmet and pipes to his flocks.³ Consider Ovid's recitations to the Getae. Addressing a large audience in their native tongue, he sings the praises of the "great white father" at Rome. Rattling their quivers, they applaud him, while one from the number exclaims: "Since you write thus of Caesar, you ought long since to have been restored to him."⁴ Perhaps this comment was actually uttered; if so, was there not a grim humor in it which Ovid fails to see? But it does not seem unfair to class the speaker in this case with the *senex* who tells of Orestes and Pylades according to Euripides. We cannot agree with a writer who says that Ovid, speaking sincerely, saw any beauty in the primitive people around him.⁵ Replying to direct criticism from the townsmen, he does disclaim animosity and even protest affection, but it is noteworthy that the only thing he finds to record in their favor is their services to him.⁶ In the land itself he seems at times to have felt a certain wild grandeur. At any rate, the passage in which he marshals the winds and the rivers in a flood of sonorous names has a certain swing and bigness about it.⁷

Ovid complains at divers times of the atrophy of his talent, the failure of his vein. What he means, perhaps, is that at Tomi he was a poet without a specialty. The tendency in Ovid's circle was toward literary specialization. He has his friends neatly ticketed in this respect and defines their fields with exactness.⁸ His own field was the erotic, and this he was denied. He remains unconvinced of the justice of this, as he shows in his admirable defense of the erotic.⁹ Here he even exceeds the bounds of tact toward the

¹ *Tr.* iv. 4. 63 f.

² *Ibid.* iii. 9.

³ *Tr.* v. 10. 25.

⁴ *Ex Ponto* iv. 13. 23-38.

⁵ Cf. Gehman, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

⁶ *Ex Ponto* iv. 14. 23-63.

⁷ *Ibid.* iv. 10. 37-58.

⁸ *Ibid.* iv. 16. The idea of a sort of poets' guild or authors' union is not advanced seriously by Ovid, but the references he makes to it indicate that those who worked in different fields might combine to promote one another's wares; cf. *Ex Ponto* iii. 4. 65-72; ii. 10. 17-20.

⁹ *Tr.* ii.

Caesars when he says that the most read parts of Virgil's *Aeneid* were the erotic portions.¹ Humor had been another main asset, and his mood denied him this. The nearest approach to it is his rather frigid juggling with the name of Tuticanus.² His gift for psychologizing can be shown only in his handling of various commonplaces, and this is well done; to this we should perhaps add his glance at the psychology of a holiday crowd.³ With all these handicaps it is really remarkable that the poems of exile contain so much good poetry. I should like to add a register of favorite passages, but this is outside my thesis, which was to deal only with the tangible.

¹ *Tr.* ii. 533-36.

² *Ex Ponto* iv. 12. 1-16.

³ *Tr.* iv. 2. 25-26, 29-34.